

## Suburban entrepreneurs pave their own path

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Oct. 16 was Boss's Day. (It's OK if you didn't know. Most of us aren't bosses, so it's understandable).

But Bret Bonnet, 24, knew. He received a card from his staff of nine — all of whom are older than he is and one of whom is his own mother.

"That was pretty cool to think I'm someone's boss," he says.

Pretty cool, indeed.

It's a rare 20-something who is in a management position, and an even rarer 20-something who is running an entire company that he had the hutzpah to create all by himself.

We found 10 entrepreneurs under the age of 30 who are all from the suburbs and are all working hard to turn their dreams into reality — and make money at the same time.

If you're interested in following their footsteps, know this: Running your own business is no easy task. The hours are long (really long, like working on Thanksgiving and Christmas long), the challenges are many and the risk of failure is just as high as the possibility of success.

But on the flip side, these entrepreneurs all say that they couldn't imagine doing anything else.



**Joshua Dean**

**Age:** 28

**From:** Rockford

**Now lives:** Naperville

**Business:** [Joshua Dean Real Estate](#) in Naperville

**Joshua's story:** As the son of a real estate developer, Joshua Dean knows something about the housing market. And as a 28-year-old, he also knows how much technology has changed the way people operate. So it makes sense that Dean's doing his best to use technology in innovative ways to help people buy and sell property.

"If you're a Realtor and you're not up on the technology ... you're going to get left behind," Dean says.

Not only does Joshua Dean Real Estate help buyers and sellers purchase and sell homes, but Dean works closely with his sellers to create videos of a seller's property, so that potential buyers can learn a lot more about a house than they could learn in the few cryptic lines of a property brochure that Realtors usually hand out to prospective buyers. Dean videos the sellers and asks them to talk about their house.

"(They talk about) what they love about the home, why they purchased it 12 years ago," he says, adding that they can give personal touches in their videos, such as talking about how much they love the library or the parks nearby. "That helps provide some added information and helps create an emotional connection between the potential buyer and the home."

Dean has also produced promotional videos about various suburbs including Naperville, Aurora and Oswego and posts them to networking websites such as YouTube, Google, Yahoo, and others. "This helps get people interested in living in those towns." "As real estate brokers, we don't just have to sell the house,

we have to sell the neighborhood, we have to sell the town,” he says.

**Dean’s secret for success:** Be able to accept criticism. “I can make the idea (better) if I get negative feedback,” he says.



**Ken Kaulen**

**Age:** 27

**From:** Naperville

**Now lives:** Chicago

**Business:** [Chicago Charitable Games](#) in Chicago

**Ken’s story:** Not long after graduating from Mississippi State University, Ken Kaulen was dealt a bad hand. He was working at a start-up Internet company, and suddenly the owners of the company realized they could get his assistant to do his job for a lot less money, and he was let go.

“I promised myself I would never let that happen again. I would never want my future to be in the hands of somebody else,” says Kaulen, a Waubonsie Valley High School grad. “Win or lose, it was all on me.”

So Kaulen became an entrepreneur. In 2005, he started a company that sold custom-made golf clubs, which he ended up selling to another company.

Then, in 2006, Kaulen organized a poker night for a family friend’s church, and it dawned on him that setting up poker nights as fundraisers for non-profit groups might be a good bet for a business.

Kaulen and his brother launched Chicago Charitable Games in 2006 and held their first event in 2007. So far, Kaulen’s set up more than 40 charity poker events for VFWs, animal shelters, theater groups and more.

Kaulen’s company doesn’t staff the events; he just taps into the poker-playing community in the Chicago area for people looking for places to play. By getting them to come to the fundraiser, he brings new blood to the non-profits — a win-win for both the poker players and the charities.

“I get 250 to 400 strangers that maybe haven’t heard about (the charity before). They get all new people,” Kaulen says.

**Ken’s secrets for success:** Be self-motivated. “It’s such a feeling of pride and self accomplishment that I took this task, I took it head on and look where I am,” he says.



**Phil Zuziak**

**Age:** 26

**From:** Hanover Park

**Now lives:** Hanover Park

**Business:** [Tiki Terrace](#) and A Custom Productions in Prospect Heights

**Phil’s story:** All risk takers play with fire, but Phil Zuziak can juggle with it. Literally.

Back when he was a student at Streamwood High School, Zuziak and his two brothers, James and Scott, were into juggling, and one day they saw a performance by the Barefoot Hawaiian, a Polynesian dance troupe that juggled with fire. Within a month, all three of them had adopted a whole new aloha spirit.

“We just became totally submerged in the whole Hawaiian culture,” Zuziak says.

Since then, Zuziak’s been to Hawaii more than a dozen times, and he now ranks as one of the best Tahitian dancers in the world.

The Zuziak brothers joined the Barefoot Hawaiian troupe and soon started a business making Hawaiian-themed props like wooden tikis and fake volcanoes. Today, they’ve expanded that business, called A Custom Production, to make all kinds of other party paraphernalia like South of the Border displays, Christmas kitsch and Halloween decorations.

In November 2005, the Zuziaks opened Tiki Terrace, a Hawaiian-themed restaurant and bar in Prospect Heights that also features live Polynesian shows.

"We're the only place that we know of in the Midwest where you can get Polynesian-style food and a Polynesian-style show in a dinner package," Zuziak says.

Zuziak says he's proud to be spreading aloha. "For people who have never been to Hawaii before, they can come to Tiki Terrace and get a taste of Hawaii," he says.

**Phil's secret for success:** Don't listen to naysayers. Years before the Zuziaks got Tiki Terrace off the ground, Phil says a local restaurant owner told his brother that opening up a Hawaiian-themed restaurant was a stupid idea. "That really motivated us to do that," Zuziak says. "We never lost that dream, and it's something we still remember to this day, so it was a blessing for him to say that."



**Kathryn Kerrigan**

**Age:** 27

**From:** Libertyville

**Now lives:** Libertyville

**Business:** [Kathryn Kerrigan Shoes](#) in Libertyville

**Kathryn's story:** As part of her MBA program at Loyola University, Kathryn Kerrigan had to come up with a business plan for a niche market. Her idea: Sell shoes to women with big feet.

It all seemed like just a school assignment, until Kerrigan, who's 6 feet tall, had to find shoes to wear to a wedding. "I basically had an adult meltdown," Kerrigan says. "And dealing with that for the last 10 years, I thought ... no other company is making this product, so there's no reason why I can't do it on my own."

Kerrigan launched her Web site in December 2005, which specializes in high-fashion shoes for women in sizes 6 to 13, all of which are designed by Kerrigan herself and are handmade in Italy and Spain.

Kerrigan now has a staff of four, and she runs a storefront in Libertyville in addition to the Web site. She's also planning to launch a clothing line for tall women beginning in 2008.

Kerrigan says she loves being able to help women feel good about themselves. "(I like that) we're putting out a product that's missing in the marketplace," she says.

**Kathryn's secret for success:** Have mentors you can trust. Kerrigan still gets advice from her former basketball coach. "It's really good to have those relationships you can turn to for help," she says.

She also says you can't just go into a bank with a good idea; you also need to back it up with lots of financial data to show when you think you'll be able to turn your idea into a money-making venture.



**Junaid Walid Karim**

**Age:** 24

**From:** Schaumburg

**Now lives:** Bartlett

**Business:** [Aria Hookah Lounge](#) in Schaumburg, Addison, Glendale Heights and Grayslake and [Moda 4 Men](#) in Schaumburg

**Junaid's story:** It seems like Junaid Walid Karim's cell phone never stops ringing. That's just what happens when you run four different hookah bars and a men's clothing store — in addition to having a full-time job at a Fortune 500 company.

Karim always knew he wanted to start his own business. When he was a student at Streamwood High School, he started a Web-based company that sold after-market car parts, like rims and flashy hub caps.

And when he was studying finance and accounting at DePaul University, Karim noticed there were lots of cool, non-bar places to hang out at in Lincoln Park, but few in the suburbs.

Karim graduated from college last year, and shortly after, he opened the Aria Lounge in Schaumburg, a place where you can chill and talk to friends while smoking on a hookah. He opened his second location in Addison this September and his third in Glendale Heights in October; the Grayslake location is set to open in November.

And last month, he opened Moda 4 Men, a clothing boutique in Schaumburg geared toward guys age 18 to 27, another attempt to bring the hip attitude of the city to the 20-somethings in the 'burbs.

**Junaid's secret to success:** Hire people who believe in your mission. "The people I've hired who've been great are usually my customers," he says.



**Bret Bonnet**

**Age:** 24

**From:** Naperville

**Now lives:** Montgomery

**Business:** [Quality Logo Products](#) in Aurora

**Bret's story:** Bret Bonnet will tell you that Quality Logo Products all began during a crazy drunken night in Aruba with his friend Michael Wenger. Don't believe him.

Sure, that night was pivotal in getting Wenger and Bonnet to become partners, but Bonnet's dream to become an entrepreneur goes back much further than that.

When Bonnet was a 16-year-old student at Neuqua Valley High School, he got a job working for a company that put logos and names on anything from T-shirts to koozies to water bottles.

He was so good at selling the products that soon he was practically running the company, and he did the same thing at two other logo product companies. "I was frustrated because I was doing so much for these companies ... and they were reaping the benefits of my hard work," he says.

So when he met Wenger, whom he describes as the yin to his yang, he decided it was time to go into business for himself.

Bonnet and Wegner officially launched Quality Logo Products in 2004, and now they process about 50 orders a day, with the average order totaling about \$450. They own (not rent) their offices in Aurora, and they have a staff of nine, all of whom are older than Bonnet.

Bonnet says he won't let his employees get taken advantage of. "Treat your employees with respect," he says. "That is the No. 1 thing."

This year, in fact, Bonnet was surprised with a card on Boss' Day. "That was pretty cool to think I'm someone's boss," he says.

**Bret's secrets of success:** Don't waste your time in college. "Save your money," Bonnet says. "Take that money and at least give (your idea) a shot. It's your only chance to venture out with the risks being what they are. Every day that goes by is a missed opportunity."



**Brian Taylor**

**Age:** 28

**From:** Highland Park

**Now lives:** Chicago

**Business:** [Kernel Seasons](#) in Elk Grove Village

**Brian's story:** Brian Taylor loves popcorn. He REALLY loves popcorn.

"I was eating it in college all the time," says Taylor, who went to the University of Michigan. "I was looking for flavors, and I started making my own."

After a little experimentation in his dorm room, Taylor realized that creating flavors you could sprinkle onto popcorn could actually explode into a real business. So while he was still at school, he developed his line of all-natural seasonings (which includes white cheddar, barbecue, jalapeno, chocolate marshmallow and others). By the time he graduated in 2000, Taylor was hot to pop.

Today, Taylor's 11-person company sells Kernel Seasons flavors in half of the grocery stores in the country and a third of all the movie theaters. They're in every Blockbuster and Wal-Mart in the country. Not bad for someone who majored in philosophy.

Taylor says he loves being an entrepreneur because he gets to have an idea and watch it go from the planning stages to reality. "It's fun to be in control of the process," he says. "Most of the creativity is figuring out how to execute the idea, not necessarily the idea itself."

**Brian's secret to success:** Get started, even without a lot of capital. "Start small and you can test the concept," he says. "The most important thing to do is to do it."



**John Ugolini**

**Age:** 25

**From:** Glendale Heights

**Now lives:** Chicago

**Business:** [Kickstand Productions](#) in DeKalb

**John's story:** As a teenager, John Ugolini was almost addicted to going to live rock shows in Chicago. But when he landed in college at NIU, suddenly he was stuck out in the cornfields of DeKalb without anywhere to see live music.

Ugolini knew enough about the music industry to know that bands won't play two shows within the same metro area in the same time period. And he also knew that DeKalb is far enough away from Chicago that it wouldn't be included in the same market, so bands could easily pick up another date if they were touring through the area.

All he had to do was convince bands and record labels that DeKalb was worth their effort.

In 2004, Ugolini founded Kickstand Productions, a company that books shows at the House Café in DeKalb, the Rock Box in Rockford and places like Schubas, Subterranean and the Beat Kitchen downtown.

"The hardest hurdle I had to overcome was the stigma DeKalb had," Ugolini says.

Now, instead of banging down bands' doors, bands and record labels are coming to Ugolini, hoping to schedule a date in Husky-ville. "It's kind of been put on the map," Ugolini says.

John's secret to success: Know your market. "Know your business, know your market and really study your industry," he says.



**Jordan Lowe**

**Age:** 27

**From:** Lake Forest

**Now lives:** Chicago

**Business:** [Server Central](#) in Chicago

**Jordan's story:** Being in the right place at the right time for Jordan Lowe meant being in his off-campus apartment at the University of Illinois in 1999 and 2000. It was in the nascent years of the

Internet age, when everyone was scrambling to buy domain names and start Web sites. But it was also right after the Dot-Com bubble had burst, so buying up server space was dirt cheap.

Lowe started a company that sold domain names for \$5 a month and hosted the information on a server in his apartment. As Internet traffic grew, he had to buy more servers, and by the time he graduated, he was already employing other people to help him run his growing server business. He started housing servers in Bloomington before moving operations to Chicago.

Today, Lowe is president of Server Central, a 40-person company that hosts server space for about 30,000 customers, including the Discovery Channel, Caterpillar and the Cook County Treasurer. They run 50,000 servers and have offices in Ashburn, Va., New York, Atlanta, Dallas, Los Angeles, San Jose, Amsterdam, London and Tokyo.

Lowe says as people continue to want to watch video online, companies need to expand their server capacity, which is a good thing for his company.

**Jordan's secret for success:** Learn how to delegate. "It's very important to hire good people," he says.



**Al Goldstein**

**Age:** 26

**From:** Niles

**Now lives:** Chicago

**Business:** [CashNetUSA](#) in Lake Bluff and Chicago

**Al's story:** If you ever run into smart people, make sure to stay in contact with them. You'll never know how they might help you along the way.

That was the case, anyway, for Al Goldstein who went to Niles West High School. These days he runs a multi-million dollar company, and all of the company's executives except one went to either Niles West or Niles North. And that one who didn't? Goldstein was roommates with him in New York.

Goldstein was a finance major at U of I, and after he graduated he worked at Deutsche Bank on Wall Street for a little more than a year. Then a friend of his told him how much he could make if he went into the payday advance business, and Goldstein decided to quit his job in NYC and open a cash advance store in Kenosha in 2004. And soon he realized that while there are lots of cash advance stores around, there are almost nowhere that you can get the same service online.

Thus, CashNetUSA was born. Goldstein took pains to make sure his site complied with laws in all 50 states, which helped his site become a national powerhouse. In September 2006, Cash America bought the company, which now has about 500 employees. They received \$36 million for their first payout from Cash America, with more money to come.

Goldstein says he loves that he created something that didn't exist before. "With finance, you're not really creating anything new," he says. "That, I think, is the value of entrepreneurship."

**Al's secret to success:** Don't be too cheap. Goldstein says one of the biggest mistakes he made was trying to save money by using programmers in the Ukraine, but consequently, communication problems hindered the project. He also says he took too long to bring on additional employees and tried to do too much himself at first. "Build out your team," he says.